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ABSTRACT

The concept of commitment has been studied both in theory and in research. Commitment is considered as having two constructs, personal dedication and constraint commitment. This study was conducted to examine several questions concerning commitment. It examined whether constraint or dedication increase over time; whether there is a difference between men and women in each of these two areas; and what implications the findings have for counselors who work with relationship issues. Subjects were 21 women and 16 men recruited from various sources: church groups, groups of graduate students, and community contacts. The subjects completed the Commitment Inventory, a 60-item, 10-subscale inventory that measures the components of constraint and dedication separately. The two constructs were studied by comparing personal dedication to constraint and by studying each construct over time. The results showed that males had a higher level of constraint than did females and that the level of constraint seemed to increase over time. Dedication was similar for both males and females, and the level remained relatively steady over time. It is possible that, among clients who seek counseling for marital distress, those who rate high in personal dedication might be able to work through problems that those who score lower could not. If this appears to be the case, working to increase or develop personal dedication may be a start in early treatment of marital difficulties. (NB)

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Commitment in Relationships: A Look at Constraint and Dedication

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Abstract

The concept of commitment has been studied both in theory and in research. Commitment is considered as having two constructs, personal dedication and constraint commitment. Using the Commitment Inventory (CI), each of these constructs were studied comparing personal dedication to constraint as well as studying each over time. Evaluating the results cross-sectionally showed that males had a higher level of constraint than females and that the level of constraint seemed to increase over time. Conversely, dedication was similar for both males and females, and remained relatively steady over time. Further implications concerning commitment in relationship or marital counseling are discussed.

What is commitment? Are there differences between males and females in their commitment to personal relationships? Does this level of commitment change over time? What implications does this have to counseling people who are dealing with commitment in their relationships?

This preliminary study in addition to several others concerning commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Rusbult, 1980; Lund,1985), theoretically is intended to further our understanding of commitment. The challenge people face is how to find common ground between the commitment of the need for obligation and and the commitment of the need to be "true to themselves as individuals, honest in relationships, and respectful of their different growth needs" (Welwood, 1985, p.5).

Stanley and Markman (1992) found the definition of commitment to be two-fold. In the sentence, "Steve is really committed to his job", commitment is conveyed as a sense of dedication. However, in the sentence, "Steve committed to do this, he can't back out now", commitment is conveyed in the sense of constraint or obligation.

Studies of validity using these constructs have been shown for dedication (Rusbult, 1980) and constraint (Lund, 1985). Personal dedication as

defined by Stanley and Markman (1992) is "the desire of an individual to maintain or improve the quality of his or her relationship for the joint benefit of the participants. It is evidenced by a desire not only to continue in the relationship, but also to improve it, to sacrifice for it, to invest in it, to link personal goals to it, and to seek the partner's welfare, not simply one's own" (p. 595).

To differentiate then, constraint is the "forces that constrain individuals to maintain relationships regardless of their personal dedication to them. Constraints may arise from either external or internal pressures, and they favor relationship stability by making termination of a relationship more economically, socially, personally, or psychologically costly" (p. 596).

The discussion of the varieties of love (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992) focuses attention on the continuity of commitment over time. The stability of relationships have been argued by some that in mate selection, marriage to a similar person promotes consistency (Caspi & Herbener, 1990), and people are apt to repeat behaviors that are successful in their relationship suggesting stability in marital quality (Johnson, Amoloza & Booth, 1992). Welwood (1985)

concludes that "since falling in love is an inherently unstable condition, it is inevitable that lovers will want to stabilize their relationship in a living arrangement that can foster intimacy, caring and commitment" (p.11).

The Investment Model (Rusbult, 1980) states that commitment increases over time in part because "the resources put into a relationship increases the cost of withdrawing from it" (p.174). Yet the cost is affected by the personal dedication involving future relationship quality as well as a factor in future relationship stability (Stanley & Markman, 1992). This study's objectives were to answer some questions: (1) does constraint or dedication increase over time, (2) is there a difference between men and women in each or these two areas, and (3) what implications might this mean to the counselor in helping with relationship issues. This research, while in essence is longitudinal, is reviewed cross-sectionally due to the brevity of time available to this study.

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of thirty-seven subjects (21 female, 16 male) selected from various sources, 10 from church groups, 8 graduate students, and 19 from several

community contacts. Their ages ranged from 15 to 66 years with the average age of 32.76 years (SD=11.56). The subjects were predominantly white (96%) with an average education level of 14.49 years. The division of the relationship status were: currently dating (N=5, 13.51%), exclusively dating one person (N=3, 8.11%), engaged or planning to get married (N=2, 5.41%), and married (N=27, 72.97%).

Measure

The Commitment Inventory (CI) is comprised of a 60-item, 10-subscale inventory developed by Stanley and Markman (1992). The constraint and dedication components of relationships were measured separately. (See Stanley and Markman's study on Assessing commitment for a discussion of the items on this scale.) Each item was measured on a 7-point Likert scale with 1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree. According the the theory, all items were scaled so that higher scores reflected a higher degree of commitment.

Procedure

Subjects were asked if they would participate in a research project concerning relationships. Those who were willing were given the CI and were asked to answer each statement as honestly as they could. Females completing a form showed a higher return rate than

males (100% to 76.1%, respectively), and most of them 31.44 years or younger (62.5%) than 32+ years (37.5%).

Item scoring reflected a higher score with higher commitment (reversed wording was recorded in reverse scoring to have agreement with the scale).

Results

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Table 1 here

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As shown in Table 1, there is an increase of constraint over time (92.25 dating, including exclusive dating and engagement, 111.64 married less than 10 years, 117.83 married less than 20 years, and 116.25 married up to and including 30 years). Overall, males over females reflected a higher level of constraint (118.69, 104.14, SD=13.32, SD=15.16 respectively). The factor of personal dedication in marriage, however, did not greatly fluctuate over time (171.92 dating, 204.62 >10 years, 205.20 >20 years, and 202.46 >30 years). Neither was there much difference generally between males and females (199.39, 192.78, SD=13.45, SD=17.95 respectively).

Discussion

This preliminary study is to examine commitment and some differences within it. From the Locke-Wallace

Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) to the CI (Stanley & Markman, 1992), research into commitment is on-going. Reexamining the statistical data differing between age and gender leads this author to believe that the constraint factor does increase over time yet dedication remains stable. Also, males seem to realize a higher sense of constraint or obligation than do females.

Often constraint is viewed negatively by researchers and others (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Udry, 1981). But this study and others (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Johnson, Amoloza & Booth, 1992) promotes that the married subjects viewed it negatively only when personal dedication was low. Most of these (in personal communication with the author) told about how constraints helped them look at their relationship long-term and help to hold it together in day to day conflicts. Therefore it is not so much the negative connotation as the stabilizing factor in relationships.

Clinical use of the CI could show the score of higher dedication, and make use of both the stability between sexes and the stability over time. Those clients who are in counseling for marital distress, those who rate high in personal dedication, might be able to work through problems that those who score

lower could not. Working to increase or develop personal dedication may be a start in early treatment.

This study of constraint and dedication as components of commitment is just a part of the vast future study into human relationships. We indeed need to continue our research into understanding commitments.

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Table 1

	Totals	Dating/ Engaged	Married	>10 Years	>20 Years	>30 Years
Constraint						
Males	118.69	101.50	115.60	120.25	118.00	
Females	104.14	83.00	107.67	115.40	114.50	
Dedication						
Males	199.39	179.50	205.40	209.00	203.67	
Females	192.70	164.33	203.83	201.40	201.25	